

"Celeste seemed to be displeased because your mother changed the will," Penny remarked.

"Yes, Celeste has become a problem. I feel the doctor was right in suggesting a nurse for Mother. Celeste *may* mean well, but she is a distinct influence for the worse."

"Then why not get rid of her?"

"How?"

"Tell her to go."

Lorinda laughed shortly. "You don't know Celeste if you think she would take such an order from me!"

"Then have your mother dismiss her."

"I'm not sure she would do it. Furthermore, Celeste might defy her too. She has the idea she'll take orders only from my stepfather."

"I believe you're actually afraid of the woman," Penny commented.

"In a way I am," Lorinda admitted. "Mother used to dislike her intensely. Strangely, since she has become ill, she seems to depend more upon Celeste than she does upon me."

"Did it ever occur to you that Celeste might deliberately be planting ideas in your mother's mind?"

"Yes, I've thought of it. I don't believe Celeste would be evil enough to do it on purpose, but she is highly superstitious. I wish she were out of the house."

"You could get rid of her if you really wanted to. Just call in the police, and have them take over."

"I couldn't do that. Mother would never forgive me."

The girls entered the study, and Lorinda switched on a light. After pulling the blinds, she removed the wall picture, and prepared to open the safe.

Before she could spin the dials, footsteps padded on the stairway. Celeste appeared suddenly in the study doorway.

"Come quick!" she pleaded. "Mistress much worse!"

Lorinda dropped the will on the table, and with Penny close at her heels, followed Celeste up the stairway. Expecting the worst, they peered anxiously at Mrs. Rhett. She was tossing restlessly, but otherwise appeared the same as when they had seen her a few minutes ago.

"How do you feel, Mother?" Lorinda asked.

"Just the same," Mrs. Rhett replied listlessly.

Lorinda gazed questioningly at Celeste.

"Mistress much better now," the servant said. "She had sinking spell while you were downstairs."

"I'm afraid you imagined it, Celeste," Lorinda replied severely. "This really proves that we should have a trained nurse. Otherwise, you'll frighten us all out of our wits."

Celeste started to make a retort, but just then Mrs.

Rhett spoke: "Lorinda, did you put the will in the safe?" she asked.

"I was doing it when Celeste called. I'll attend to it right away."

Lorinda stooped to kiss her mother and offer a glass of water which was declined. She then went downstairs once more with Penny.

"What do you suppose possessed Celeste to frighten me so?" she remarked thoughtfully. "Did Mother seem changed to you?"

"Not a particle."

Reaching the study, Lorinda went directly to the table where she had left the signed will. The paper was not there.

"Why, Penny, what did I do with it?" she demanded in bewilderment. "I was certain I left it here."

"I distinctly recall that you did," Penny replied, her gaze wandering to an open window where a curtain fluttered in the breeze. "Lorinda, I think while we were away, someone came in from outside and took the will!"

CHAPTER

17

THE STOLEN WILL

PENNY DARTED to the open window, peering out onto the dark street. No one was in sight, although Jerry's car with dimmed headlights still stood at the curb.

"Who could have taken the will?" Lorinda wailed. "I'm sure it didn't blow out the window and it didn't sprout legs and walk off either!"

"Perhaps Celeste—"

"She was upstairs all the time we were out of this room," Lorinda interrupted.

"It seemed odd she called us just at the moment she did—particularly when your mother had not suffered a relapse."

Lorinda did not appear to hear Penny's remark. Half doubting that the paper could be missing, she searched on the floor near the safe, under the window and in every corner of the room.

"I suspect someone deliberately stole that will!"

Penny said with conviction. "Wait here! I may be able to learn more about it!"

Hastening outdoors, she gazed about the grounds. No one was in sight. She went directly to the press car. The automobile was deserted.

"Now what became of Jerry?" she asked herself impatiently. "Just when I need him!"

Disappointed, she turned toward the house again. Then she saw the reporter coming up a dark path from the direction of the beach.

"Jerry!" she called softly.

"Hi, Penny!" he returned. "Ready to go?"

"Oh, no! Everything is in a dreadful mess here. Lorinda's mother is very sick. She made a will, and Lorinda started to put it in the safe. Then we were called out of the room by the housekeeper, and when we returned, the paper was gone!"

"When did that happen, Penny?"

"Just now."

"Then that fellow I chased must have been the thief!"

"You saw someone take the will, Jerry?"

"I was sitting in the car," the reporter related. "A light was on in one of the downstairs rooms, but I was too sleepy to pay much attention. Suddenly though, I saw a man who apparently had been hiding in the shrubbery, rise up and climb through an open window."

"A man! Could you see who it was?"

"No, it was too dark. I jumped out of the car, but before I could cross the yard, the fellow climbed out through the window again, and started off. I called to him. He covered his face and ran. I chased him, but the fellow ducked down a path and I lost him."

"He must have stolen the will, Jerry! But how did he know about it, and why would it be of any value to him? Everything is so mixed up!"

"Maybe we ought to give the police a buzz."

Penny nodded. "I'll see what Lorinda wants to do," she replied. "Until now, the Rhetts have studiously avoided telling their troubles to the police—in fact, I am afraid Mrs. Rhett hasn't told everything she knows about her husband's disappearance."

"I'll wait in the car," Jerry said.

Penny let herself into the house again and made her way through the dark living room to the library where a light burned.

"Lorinda—" she began, only to stop short.

For it was not Lorinda who stood with her back toward the door, awkwardly turning the dials of the wall safe. Instead, Celeste whirled around, plainly dismayed by the girl's unexpected appearance in the doorway.

"Celeste!" Penny said sharply. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," the woman muttered, her mouth sullen.

"You were trying to get into that safe! Is it the will you want, or are you after the Zudi drum?"

Penny's words, shot blindly, struck the target. Celeste's eyes flashed and she advanced a step toward the girl.

"You go away from here! Never come back!" she ordered harshly.

"Sorry, I'm not taking orders from you, Celeste. Why do you hate Lorinda and Mrs. Rhett? What is your little game?"

Celeste glared at Penny. She drew in her breath and expelled it with a hissing sound through her yellow, crooked teeth. Her hand clutched at an object hidden beneath her uniform and worn around her neck on a dirty cord.

With no warning, she broke into a jargon which Penny could not understand. But the meaning was clear enough even if the words were unintelligible. Celeste was calling down all manner of evil upon her head!

"Go!" Celeste cried in English. "You come here again—harm befall you!"

"Celeste, all your jungle hocus pocus doesn't impress me in the least. I'll leave when I feel in the mood—not before. What were you after in the safe?"

The woman's eyes met Penny's defiantly. She reached out as if to strike her, but at that moment

footsteps padded on the stairway. Pushing past Penny, Celeste retreated to the kitchen.

Lorinda came into the library, gazing about curiously. "Thought I heard voices," she commented.

"You did. Celeste was here. Guess what? I found her tampering with the wall safe."

"She may have been trying to learn if the Zudi drum was stolen," Lorinda said absently. "I'm far more worried about the will. What became of it?"

Penny repeated what Jerry had witnessed, adding: "Obviously the will was taken by the man who climbed through the window. Could it have been Antón?"

"Antón? Why, I doubt that he even knew about the will, because Mother decided to change it at a moment's notice. What reason would he have for taking it? Neither he nor Celeste figured in the terms of either document."

"It seemed to me Celeste was tremendously interested," Penny said. "Oh, well, the loss shouldn't be of serious consequence. Your mother can draw up another will."

"That's exactly what she won't do. I told her about the will being taken, Penny. She immediately decided it was another omen—a sign that she should leave everything the way it is."

"How foolish! Celeste must have put those notions in her head!"

"I'm sure I don't know. As for the will, I never did encourage her to change it, because not for a moment do I believe she is sick enough to die. I don't want Mother's money. I only want her to get well and strong and be happy again. Penny, you don't think she is seriously ill?"

"The doctor said nothing is the matter with her."

"Yet we both know something dreadful is wrong." Lorinda's finger tips nervously tapped the table edge. "Oh, Penny, I'm scared—terribly scared. I don't explain it, but I just *feel* a sinister something in the air!"

"You shouldn't be here alone with Celeste and Antón. Why not override them and hire a nurse or companion for your mother?"

"Maybe I will," Lorinda agreed. "I'll think it over until tomorrow."

"You'll report the theft of the will to the police, of course?"

"No," Lorinda decided instantly. "They would only ask embarrassing questions."

"Why, are you so reluctant to take anyone into your confidence?"

"We're in enough trouble now, Penny. Please, let's not talk about it any more until tomorrow."

Decidedly puzzled by Lorinda's attitude, Penny said goodbye and rejoined Jerry in the car. He had seen no more of the mysterious prowler and was convinced the man had fled the estate.

"Let's go," he said, starting the car.

As the automobile swung down the driveway, Penny peered intently at the roadside shrubbery. The bushes were crashing back and forth in the rising wind, but no one was visible anywhere near the estate. Chilled, she closed the car window.

"Do you think that hurricane really is heading our way?" she asked her companion.

"Didn't see the government report tonight," Jerry replied. "Probably at the last minute, the storm will veer off and we'll escape. Riverview never was struck by a hurricane. Too far inland."

The car purred smoothly on, following the road which curled toward the beach. Penny became silent. As they turned a corner, Jerry reached out to give her hand a friendly squeeze.

"Why so quiet, kitten?" he teased.

"Just thinking, Jerry. There are so many things about the Rhett case I can't understand."

"Why trouble your little brain?"

"Because this isn't just an ordinary story to me, Jerry. I like Lorinda, and I feel that unless something is done, her mother may die."

"Don't tell me you're becoming a superstitious little heathen!"

"Certainly not! But from what the professor told us, it's a mistake to underrate the power of suggestion. Mrs. Rhett is in real danger—"

Penny broke off, listening intently.

"What was that, Jerry?" she demanded.

"Didn't hear anything. Only the wind."

"No, I distinctly heard a sound like the throb of a drum!" Penny lowered the car window. "There it is again!"

This time Jerry, too, heard the sound, far away and indistinct. "You're right!" he exclaimed, slowing the car. "From down the beach!"

Penny grasped his arm excitedly. "Stop the car!" she exclaimed. "If we can find the drummer, we may be able to solve part of the mystery!"

CHAPTER

18

THROUGH THE WINDOW

JERRY SLAMMED on the foot brake and the car came to a jerky halt at the curb. Leaping out, they stood for a moment listening.

"Don't hear anything now!" the reporter muttered.

"Let's take a gander down the beach," Penny proposed. "The sound seemed to come from that direction."

Hand in hand they cut across a vacant lot where dead weeds came waist high, then followed a sloping path to the beach. The long stretch of sand was deserted.

"We must have imagined those drums," Jerry said, pausing. "Or maybe it was the Legion fife and drum corps having a night practice."

"It was the beat of a jungle drum." Penny turned to gaze toward the Rhett mansion on the wooded hillside. All the windows, save one in an upstairs bedroom, now were dark.

By the light of a three-quarters moon which was

rising over the pines, she could see the wooden steps that led from the estate down to the beach. On either side extended tiers of twisted limestone rock. It occurred to Penny that somewhere among the cranies, a cave might be tucked away. She spoke of it to Jerry.

"Maybe," he agreed, "but I never heard of one around here."

A gust of wind caught Penny's felt hat, carrying it cartwheeling down the beach. She and Jerry raced in pursuit, colliding as they pounced on it together. They laughed, and as the reporter pulled the hat over Penny's flying hair, he kissed her quickly on the cheek.

Then before she could reprimand him, he exclaimed: "Wow! That wind really is getting strong! Let's get back to the car before we blow away!"

Penny liked Jerry and she liked the kiss. Best of all, she appreciated his consideration in never forcing serious attentions upon her. With a gay "I'll race you!", she ran ahead of him to the road.

Jerry took Penny directly home. Mrs. Weems had gone to bed while Mr. Parker had not returned from downtown.

"Will you come in and have a cup of chocolate?" Penny invited the reporter.

"Not tonight, thanks," he declined. "See you tomorrow at the office."

Penny went into the house, and after fixing herself a snack from the refrigerator, switched on the radio to catch the weather report. The news commentator, on a national hookup, warned that the hurricane continued to sweep toward the Atlantic coast, and that inland cities also were endangered.

"It really sounds serious," she thought, turning off the radio.

As she went upstairs, Mrs. Weems called to her in a sleepy voice, so Penny stepped into the housekeeper's bedroom for a moment.

"I'm glad you're home," Mrs. Weems said. "Is there any news about the approaching storm?"

"Nothing definite. The latest radio report said it's still heading this way."

"When will it strike?"

"Late tomorrow unless it veers off. It may be quite serious," Penny said.

Mrs. Weems sighed and settled beneath the covers again. "If it isn't one thing it's another! First thing in the morning we must get the awning down, and have all the shutters taken off."

"If the center of the hurricane should hit here, everything will go," Penny said cheerfully. "So why worry about shutters?"

"The storm may be a severe one, but I don't believe it will strike with hurricane force," Mrs. Weems insisted. "In any case, the shutters are coming down,

and I'll need your help! So don't try to skip out in the morning!"

Penny went to her own room, but before she could undress, she heard her father's car on the driveway. He came into the house, locked the doors for the night, then climbed the stairs.

"Hello, Dad!" she called through the half open door of her bedroom. "Any news?"

"There will be by morning," he answered grimly. "The *Star* is coming out with front page headlines warning the city to prepare for the worst!"

Penny stepped quickly out into the hall.

"Then Riverview is in the path of the hurricane! Is there danger that the city will be destroyed?"

"Damage to property is almost certain to be extensive. I've just come from a meeting with the mayor and City Council. While there's an outside chance the city may be spared, it's folly not to prepare for the full brunt of the storm. The mayor has issued a proclamation declaring an emergency and advising everyone to keep off the streets after noon tomorrow. Most businesses will close."

"Then the *Star* will shut down too?"

"No. At such a time, folks depend more than ever upon their newspaper for accurate information. We'll publish as long as we have a plant and our trucks can keep delivering."

Mr. Parker's information brought home to Penny the true seriousness of the situation. However, as she peered out of her bedroom window a few minutes later, the clear sky and bright stars belied an approaching storm.

Undressed, Penny sat for a time propped up in bed with pillows, trying to read a book. The words held little meaning. Losing interest, she snapped off the light, and snuggled down.

But she could not sleep. The dark house was filled with many strange sounds. The stairway creaked, the shutters rattled, and in the bathroom, water dripped regularly from a faucet.

Thoughts raced rampant through Penny's mind. She squirmed and tossed and became increasingly aware of the rising wind.

Suddenly she was startled by a loud crash in the yard below. Leaping out of bed, she darted to the window. A large rotten tree limb had been ripped from the backyard maple and now lay across the driveway.

"Dad will have to move it before he can get the car out of the garage in the morning," she thought. "Some fun!"

Creeping back beneath the covers, she tried again to sleep. Instead, she found herself thinking over everything that had occurred at the Rhett mansion.

Already the banker's disappearance was fading out of the newspapers, and with a hurricane in the offing, the story would be entirely forgotten.

"The police haven't shown much interest," she reflected. "Unless definite clues are obtained soon, Mr. Rhett may never be traced. The case will die."

Penny thought of the mysterious thatched roof cottage and the whispering voices.

"Those walls must have a secret panel," she reasoned. "I believe I might find it if I had an opportunity to make a thorough investigation!"

A flapping shutter reminded Penny once more of the storm. Then came the discouraging thought that even if only the tail-end of the hurricane struck River-view, the flimsy thatched cottage undoubtedly would be carried away and destroyed.

"Unless I get out there tomorrow, I'll probably lose my chance!" she told herself. "Oh, dear, how will I make it when I have a thousand other things I'm supposed to do?"

Dancing tree limbs cast weird shadows on the rough plaster wall. Penny closed her eyes, but even then sleep would not come.

Suddenly the window pane crashed, and glass clattered onto the floor. Startled, Penny sat up and groped for the night table lamp. Her first thought was that a tree branch had hurtled against the pane, breaking it.

But as the light went on, she saw that only a small hole had been broken in the glass. On the floor, scarcely two feet from the bed, lay a small object wrapped in black cloth.

Penny rolled out of bed and gingerly picked it up. Carefully and with a feeling of revulsion, she untied the packet.

Inside were two black feathers, the wing of a bird, herbs which Penny could not identify, a bit of bone, and a small amount of damp earth.

There was no warning message, nothing to identify the one who had thrown the packet, yet Penny instantly knew its significance and from whence it had come.

"Either Antón or Celeste hurled it because I've cramped their style!" she thought. "Well, their little hex won't work! I'll use this evil charm to fashion their own undoing!"

RISING WIND

THE SOUND of crashing glass brought both Mrs. Weems and Mr. Parker to the bedroom. They found Penny standing at the window, the light off, peering down into the yard.

"What's coming off here?" Mr. Parker demanded, his voice cross because he had been aroused from sound slumber. "Did something blow against the window?"

"This was thrown," Penny revealed, holding up the packet. "Dad, can you see anyone hiding in the shrubbery?"

Mr. Parker moved to the window, gazing intently about the yard.

"I don't see anyone."

"Whoever it was, he's probably gone now." Penny carefully drew the blinds before snapping on the overhead light. She handed the packet to her father.

"What's this, Penny?"

"It was thrown through the window. I suspect it's intended as a bad luck omen, and to frighten me. Evidently my work on the Rhett case is not appreciated."

"A jungle charm!" exclaimed Mrs. Weems, horrified. "Oh, Penny, I knew no good would come of your having anything to do with that queer family! Here, give that horrid thing to me—I'll burn it in the furnace."

"Not so fast," chuckled Penny. "I intend to keep it as evidence."

"But it may bring you bad luck."

"Why, Mrs. Weems, I'm surprised at you," teased Penny. "Surely you're not superstitious?"

"No," the housekeeper denied, "but from what you've told me about those queer Rhett servants, I distrust them. I don't want you even to touch that ugly package!"

"These objects aren't harmful," Penny insisted, selecting the bit of bone and offering it to Mrs. Weems. "Why attach special significance to them?"

With a shudder, the housekeeper backed away.

"Penny is right," declared Mr. Parker. "The packet is silly and has no meaning unless we build it up in our own minds. That, of course, is exactly what the one who hurled it intends us to do."

"Penny mustn't go to that dreadful place again!"

"Oh, Mrs. Weems! Don't you see, that's just what

Antón and Celeste hope to accomplish. If they can keep me away from the mansion merely by throwing one of their stupid charms through my window, their trick has been successful."

"I quite agree with Penny," Mr. Parker declared. "In fact, I may call at the mansion myself! I've become interested in Antón and Celeste—they're a very successful pair of bluffers."

"Oh, Dad! Will you go with me tomorrow?"

"Perhaps," he promised vaguely. "We'll see, when the time comes. I foresee any number of troubles far more serious than our concern with the Rhett family."

"With both of you against me, I'm only wasting my breath," Mrs. Weems sighed, drawing her robe tightly about her. "I may as well go to bed."

Penny put the black packet on the dresser after her father had finished inspecting it. "I intend to wear this charm around my neck the next time I go to the Rhetts'," she declared. "It will be fun to see how Celeste and Antón react."

"Don't carry your fun too far," her father advised. "While it's true this charm has no significance or supernatural power, Antón and Celeste may be dangerous characters. They'll bear watching."

"And I'm the one to do it," Penny chuckled. "I'm not a bit afraid of them, Dad. As you said, they're a couple of bluffers."

"I may have used the word ill-advisedly," the pub-

lisher corrected. "Don't make the mistake of underestimating them. The case, as you well know, has sinister aspects."

"I'll be careful," Penny promised soberly.

After her father had returned to his room, she went back to bed. A chill wind whistled in through the hole in the window, but she burrowed deep beneath the blankets and soon was sound asleep.

Next morning, as Mr. Parker had predicted, newspapers carried screaming headlines, announcing that the hurricane might reach Riverview by nightfall. Householders were advised to take every precaution to protect life and property.

School opened and was promptly dismissed at nine o'clock. At home, Penny helped Mrs. Weems carry in the porch awning, remove the shutters and all loose objects which were likely to be torn free by the wind.

By now, papers were blowing wildly, cluttering the yard. Each gust brought sticks or small limbs crashing down into the street.

Mrs. Weems, hovering near the radio to hear the last-minute reports, declared that the barometer continued to fall.

"The storm is steadily getting worse," she said nervously.

After lunch, Penny went to the newspaper office to inquire if Mr. DeWitt had any special assignment for her.

"Nothing right now," he said, rapidly scanning a page of copy. "But stick around. Anything may break."

Penny waited, growing increasingly restless. She was certain DeWitt had forgotten all about her, when he slammed down a telephone receiver and glanced in her direction.

"Go out on the street and see what's doing," he ordered. "Might check the police station, too, on your way in."

Penny nodded and went out through the barrier gate. The feel of the approaching hurricane was in the air. Walking toward the river, she saw blue-green water boiling into sinister white foam where it vaulted onto the docks.

Pedestrians were few in number and all hurrying. Business was at a standstill. Shutters were going up over plate glass windows, and street signs were being taken down.

Penny wandered about for a time and then, as a fine rain began to fall, sought the police station. Checking routine reports, she noted four injury cases caused by flying objects, several thefts of property, and more than the usual number of automobile accidents.

At the office once more, she wrote an impressionist account of what she had seen, then waited for another assignment.

"Penny, you may as well go home while you can

get there," DeWitt said presently. "City Traction is shutting off service at six o'clock, and after that you won't be able to take a bus."

At another time Penny might have been disappointed to be sent home when exciting news was breaking, but dismissal now fitted neatly into her plans. She was determined to make one last investigation of the thatched roof cottage at the Rhett mansion. However, to beat the storm, she must move fast.

Going out the door, Penny met Jerry who had just come in from the river front. His felt hat was dripping wet.

"It's getting nasty outside," he remarked. "How are you going home, Penny? By bus?"

"Eventually, but not just now," she grinned. "First, I have a little errand at the Rhetts'."

"Better skip it," he advised. "This storm is the real McCoy."

"Can't afford to, Jerry. I want to look over that thatched cottage once more. If I don't do it now, it probably won't be there by tomorrow."

"If you're set on going out there, better make it a speedy trip," Jerry returned. "The storm is rolling in fast."

Reaching the mansion twenty minutes later, Penny was surprised to see an unfamiliar automobile parked on the Rhett driveway. As she went up the front walk, the door opened, and three men came outside.

Without noticing the girl, they entered the car and drove away.

"Wonder who they are and what brought them here?" Penny mused.

In response to her knock, Celeste opened the door. Seeing Penny, the woman tried to close it in her face, but the girl pushed boldly past her into the hallway.

Penny purposely had worn the black packet on a string around her neck. While Celeste was closing the door, she pulled it from her dress front, and then opened her raincoat so that the housekeeper could not fail to see the object.

Celeste's eyes instantly riveted upon the dangling packet.

"My good luck charm!" said Penny. "Someone gave it to me last night!"

Celeste's lips dropped apart to show her uneven teeth.

"It is an evil packet!" she hissed. "If you wear it, sickness and death will pursue you!"

"Not this cookie," chuckled Penny. "You see, I don't believe such nonsense. Whoever tossed this thing through my window went to a lot of trouble for nothing."

Celeste's face, an interesting study in mixed emotions, suddenly became a blank mask. Hearing footsteps, the woman mumbled something and scurried away.

Lorinda came down the stairway. "Oh, Penny!" she exclaimed, grasping her hand. "I'm so glad you came! We're in such trouble!"

"Your mother is worse?"

"Yes, she is failing rapidly, and the visit of those three bankers upset her dreadfully."

"The men I met on the walk?"

"Yes, they're members of the First National Bank board. They told Mother she must make up the \$250,000 bond loss within forty-eight hours, or my stepfather will be exposed as a thief, and the estate sued! It seems Mr. Potts convinced them my stepfather had the bonds when he disappeared."

"What will your mother do?"

"What can she do? Nearly all of her property is in real estate. She might be able to raise \$30,000 cash within the required time, but never the amount they demand."

"You've heard nothing from your stepfather?"

"Not a word. The police haven't contributed any worthwhile clues either. They didn't go deeply into the case."

"Can you blame them? You and your mother withheld facts and discouraged them at every turn."

"I know."

"Why did you do it?"

"I thought you understood," Lorinda answered in a low voice. "Mother and my stepfather quarreled

violently on that last day at the bank. She didn't want the truth to get out, so she tried to keep from answering questions."

"Then your stepfather disappeared as a result of the quarrel?"

"I don't know. It is a possibility."

"You believe your stepfather may have stolen the bonds?"

"Oh, no! Never! He may have had them on his person when he went away or was spirited off, but I am sure he is no thief!"

Shutters were flapping in the wind. The porch furniture had not been brought into the house, and through the window, Penny saw that many loose, breakable objects remained in the garden. Abruptly changing the subject, she said:

"Lorinda, the storm is getting worse every minute. Can't we bring in the porch furniture?"

"I told Antón to do it early this morning. He went off somewhere. Celeste has been no help either. They're both acting so independent."

"We don't need their help. Come! We can do it together."

Lorinda put on her rain cape and they went out onto the porch. Already the rug was rain soaked. They rolled it up and carried it to the basement, where they also took the furniture. Deciding it was too late to do anything about nailing down the shut-

ters or taking them off, they brought in loose objects from the yard.

In passing the library, Penny noticed that a window was open. The curtain was drenched and rain was pouring in upon the floor.

With a cry of dismay, she ran to close it. As she turned around, she saw at once that the wall safe was exposed to view, and open.

"Lorinda!" she called.

Her friend came quickly to the doorway. "Anything wrong?" she inquired.

Penny directed her gaze toward the safe. "Did you leave it open?" she asked.

"No!" With a startled exclamation, Lorinda darted across the room. She thrust her arm into the circular opening, and withdrew it empty.

"The Zudi drum is gone!" she announced. "It's been stolen!"

TWELVE STEPS DOWN

THE NEWS did not astonish Penny for she had anticipated it. She said quietly:

"Lorinda, surely now you'll call in the police? The Zudi drum must be a very valuable trophy."

"It is. Yes, I suppose the only thing to do is notify police headquarters."

Lorinda went to a telephone, but although she tried many times, she was unable to contact the operator. "The line must be down," she reported. "The wire sounds dead."

"Then we're isolated here until after the storm. Lorinda, why don't you question Celeste and Antón?"

"It would be useless."

"Let me do it."

"Go ahead, but they'll not tell you anything," Lorinda said despairingly. "Antón and Celeste have been interested in the Zudi drum ever since they came here, but I've never known them to steal."

"Did they know the safe combination?"

"Not unless they learned it the last few days. I noticed that Celeste watches lately whenever anyone enters or leaves the library."

"Then she may have obtained the combination. I know she was tampering with the dial yesterday. Where is she now?"

"In the kitchen, I suppose."

Celeste, however, was not to be found there, nor was she in any of the upstairs bedrooms, or in her own room on the first floor adjoining the garage.

"I don't know where she and Antón went," Lorinda declared, deeply troubled. "I hate to accuse them without proof, but it does look as if they're the only ones who could have stolen the drum!"

"How about the trophies at the thatched roof cottage? Are they safe?"

"Let's find out," Lorinda proposed. "Wait, I'll get the key. Incidentally, it was mysteriously returned to my stepfather's room yesterday."

She returned with the key in a moment, and the girls ran down the slippery path through the falling rain. The whine of a steadily rising wind was in their ears as they opened the cottage door and stepped inside.

Lorinda looked carefully about. "Everything seems to be here—" she began, only to correct herself. "No, the crossed machetes which were on the wall! They're gone!"

"And the rattle!" exclaimed Penny. "Where is it?"

Lorinda pulled out the wooden chest and raised the lid. "The altar cloth is missing and any number of things! Almost everything has been taken!"

In the midst of checking over the few remaining objects in the chest, Lorinda suddenly raised her head.

"Listen!" she commanded.

At first, Penny could distinguish only the whistle of the wind, then she became aware of a low rumbling murmur which seemed to come from the very walls of the cottage.

"It's a chant!" whispered Lorinda. "I can hear drums too, as if from a long distance away!"

A little frightened, neither girl spoke for a while. The strange sound died away, then was resumed. This time they distinctly could hear the thumping of drums.

Penny went to the door of the cottage to listen. Outside there was only the whine of the wind and the crashing of tree branches.

"Lorinda, this cottage must have a secret passage!" she declared excitedly. "I thought so before, and now I'm certain of it!"

Already Lorinda was down on hands and knees before the fireplace, tapping the tiles. They gave forth a hollow sound. However, she could find no opening.

Penny removed a huge black kettle from hanging chains, and peered up into the chimney. Her groping hand encountered a rod which she assumed controlled the draft. She pulled on it. The floor beneath her feet suddenly gave way, and she would have pitched through the opening had not Lorinda seized her arms and held her.

Scrambling back to solid flooring, Penny peered down into the dark opening where the hearth had been. The tiles were only a sham, she saw now, fastened to a hinged rectangle of wood, which had fallen back like a trap door.

Steep stone steps led down into inky darkness.

"Why, I never dreamed this was here!" Lorinda whispered. "It must have been built that summer Mother and I were away!"

The sound of drums and incantations came plainly now. Neither Penny nor Lorinda was eager to investigate the passage. They feared that they might encounter something with which they would be unable to cope. But to retreat was equally unthinkable.

Penny found the cocoanut shell lamp and lit the floating wick. Moving ahead, she cautiously descended the stone steps. Lorinda kept close beside her.

Twelve steps led almost straight down. There the girls found themselves in a bricked-over passageway,

so narrow they could barely squeeze through. However, after they had gone a few yards, it widened a little.

"Where do you suppose this leads?" Penny whispered. "To the river?"

"Probably. It seems to me the sound of the drums came from that direction."

The weird noises no longer could be heard and the silence disturbed the girls. Could it be that in entering the tunnel they had revealed their presence? Nervous and tense, they moved forward at a snail's pace, feeling their way along the wall and taking care to make no betraying sound.

The tunnel led downhill. In places the roof was so low the girls were forced to bend double to pass through. The walls were damp and crumbly and, at points near the roof, water dripped steadily.

Then presently Penny halted, shifting the lamp to her other hand. The passage had widened into a tiny room from which two tunnels branched.

"Which shall we take?" she asked Lorinda.

They selected the wider of the two, which soon proved a deception. Scarcely had they left the little dugout than it narrowed until they were barely able to edge through.

"Shall we turn back and try the other?" Penny suggested.

Lorinda wanted to keep on. "We're moving up-

hill now," she pointed out. "I suspect this must lead either to the house or the road."

Her guess proved to be correct. Another twenty yards and the tunnel terminated abruptly in front of a door. It opened readily. A dozen roughly carved steps led upward to a trap door. Penny pushed it aside and blinking owlishly, climbed out into a bedroom.

She saw then that the trap door had been cut in the center of the room floor, hidden from view by a large rag rug which now lay in an untidy heap.

"Why, we're in Celeste's room!" Lorinda exclaimed as she too emerged. "Adjoining the garage!"

"This explains quite a few things to me," remarked Penny.

"And to me! Celeste must have known about this passage all the time, but she never hinted of it to Mother or me!"

"If you ask my opinion, Celeste not only has known about the passage, she's been using it regularly," declared Penny, gazing curiously about the room.

The bed had been carelessly made, and a red bandana handkerchief had been left hanging on one of the wooden posts. On the dresser were a number of objects which drew the girls' attention. From the pin tray Penny picked up a tiny black feather and there were strips of torn black cloth which exactly matched the packet she wore about her neck.

"This proves it!" she exclaimed. "Celeste made the evil charm which was thrown through my window last night!"

"Charm?" Lorinda inquired. "Penny, what are you talking about?"

Penny showed her the packet and explained how it had been hurled through the window pane. "I'm sure Celeste had Antón do it or perhaps she tossed it herself. At any rate, she made the packet to frighten me, only it didn't work."

"Unless Celeste can explain matters satisfactorily, I'll turn her over to the police!" Lorinda said angrily.

"Finding her may not be so easy now. Also getting her into police custody may take a little doing. I'm afraid we've waited too long, Lorinda."

"No, we'll find her!" Lorinda announced with determination. "After all, she doesn't know how much we have learned. Let's investigate the other passageway."

"All right," Penny agreed, "but this lamp isn't much good. We need a flashlight."

"I have one in my room. I'll get it, see if Mother is all right, and be right back."

Lorinda was gone less than five minutes. "Mother is sleeping, so it's safe to leave her," she reported. "Here's the flash, but I couldn't find an extra battery."

Descending into the passageway, the girls retraced their steps to the tiny dugout midway between the

thatched roof cottage and the mansion. As they entered the other tunnel, they again heard the throb of jungle drums, and the weird incantation of many guttural voices.

"A chant to the Serpent God!" whispered Lorinda. "Do you hear that high-pitched drum which sounds above the others?"

Penny nodded as she moved forward in the dark, narrow passage.

"It is the Zudi," Lorinda added. "I would know its tone anywhere! We must recover it, but if what I think is so, it will be a dangerous task!"

CEREMONIAL CAVE

THE TUNNEL sloped gently downward, apparently toward the river beach. As the girls moved along, the pulsing of the drums came with increasing crescendo. They could hear the wailing chant plainly now, an incantation in which many voices were united.

"Better switch off the light," Lorinda advised in a whisper. "We're getting close."

Penny darkened the flashlight, groping her way along the damp, rocky wall. The passage now had widened, and suddenly ahead, she saw the flickering flame of a torch.

In the shadowy light swayed a half dozen celebrants of the weird rites. The room was circular, a cavern carved from the rocks years before by the action of water.

Penny's gaze focused upon the dancing figures. Antón, barefooted and grotesque with a red turban wound about his head, led the procession, beating out

a rhythm and shaking the gourd rattle which had been stolen from the thatched cottage.

Behind him came a drummer Penny did not recognize, and three other dancers, who carried aloft a banner upon which were metallic, glittering serpentine symbols.

But it was Celeste, garbed in scarlet with an embroidered stole over her shoulders, who dominated the scene. Seated before an altar where two tall candles burned, she pounded out the basic rhythm on a long, narrow drum.

"The Zudi!" whispered Lorinda. "She stole it from the safe!"

"Let's make her give it up!"

"No! No!" Lorinda grasped Penny's arm, holding her back. "It would be folly to show ourselves now. Antón, Celeste and their stupid converts are hypnotized by their own music. If they knew we were watching their rites, there's no telling what they would do."

"Celeste is a cruel, dangerous woman."

"We'll turn her over to the police. I realize now it's the only thing to do."

Fascinated, the girls watched the strange sight. The drums were beating faster now, and at each boom of the Zudi, Antón leaped with frenzied glee rigid as an arrow into the air.

"Who are the others?" Penny whispered.

Lorinda shook her head. "No-good friends of Antón and Celeste probably," she returned. "Recruits from the slums of Riverview."

On the altar were many objects, a basket of bread, a basin of cooked fish, a carved wooden serpent and a wreath of feathers. A kettle contained a brew from which the dancers at intervals dipped with a gourd cup and drank.

Outside the cave, the wind howled an accompaniment to the wild ceremony, covering the shrill shrieks and savage laughter.

"We've seen enough of this!" whispered Penny. "Let's get the police and break it up!"

"All right," agreed Lorinda. "I hate to turn Antón and Celeste over to the authorities, but I'm convinced now they have reverted to heathen ways, and may even be responsible for Mother's sickness."

They started to retreat, making no sound. In the darkness Lorinda stumbled over a small rock. She made no outcry as she saved herself from a fall, but her shoes scuffed noisily and her body thudded heavily against the wall.

Instantly the Zudi drum ceased its rhythm. "What was that?" they heard Celeste ask sharply.

The girls huddled against the wall. An instant later, Antón, a torch in his hand, peered down the tunnel.

His cry told the girls they had been seen. In panic, they started down the passageway with Antón in hot pursuit. And close at his heels came Celeste and her followers.

Escape was impossible. Before the girls had gone a half dozen yards they were overtaken. Though they struggled to free themselves, Antón's grasp was like a steel bracelet upon their arms. They were half dragged back to the cave.

"Antón! Celeste! What is the meaning of this?" Lorinda demanded, seeking to regain control of the servants by sheer power of will.

She tried to shake herself free, but Antón did not release her. He awaited the word of his wife.

"Tie them up!" said Celeste harshly.

"Celeste, have you lost your mind!" Lorinda cried.

In the flickering light of the torch, the woman's face was like a rigid mask. Eyes burned with hatred; cheeks were deeply indrawn. Lorinda felt as if she were gazing upon a stranger, and suddenly was afraid.

"You dared to steal Father's drum!" she challenged.

"It is now my drum," retorted Celeste.

"You spied upon me many times until you learned the combination of the safe!" Lorinda accused.

Celeste did not deny the charge. She was burrowing behind the low altar and from the box-like structure drew forth a long stout cord. Severing it with

the blade of a sharp knife, she handed the two pieces to Antón who attempted to tie Lorinda's hands behind her.

The girl fought like a wild cat, and Penny, held by one of Celeste's followers, sought to free herself, but it was useless. She too was tightly bound and thrown down on the floor of the cave.

"Celeste, why are you doing this cruel thing?" Lorinda asked in a pleading tone. "Does it mean nothing to you that Father brought you here, fed you, clothed you—gave you many advantages?"

For a moment Celeste softened and seemed to hesitate. Lorinda was quick to press the advantage.

"My father and my mother have been very kind to you—"

Mention of her mother's name proved unfortunate. Celeste's face hardened into rigid lines again and she said furiously:

"I hate her! May her flesh rot away and her bones be torn asunder!"

"Celeste! And to think we ever trusted you! Mother is ill because you have willed it so—it was you who made the wicked effigy doll—you who kept planting in her mind the idea that she would become ill and die!"

"And I have the will too!" the woman said gleefully. "I told Antón to get it from the library! Then

I called you to your mother's room so he could snatch it from the table!"

"But why did you do it, Celeste? What have you gained?"

"You will not steal my master's money! The will is destroyed—burned!"

"Steal my stepfather's money? Indeed, you are out of your mind, Celeste! My stepfather has disappeared and may never be seen again."

"He lives."

"How do you know?" Lorinda cried eagerly.

"Celeste know—feel it here." The woman touched her breast.

"You've seen him—talked to him since he went away!" Lorinda accused.

"No!"

"Then unless you've had a message from him, you couldn't know whether he is alive or dead."

"Celeste know," the woman replied stubbornly. "We save the money for him."

"If my stepfather returns I'll be perfectly happy for him to have Mother's estate. You're all mixed up, Celeste. Now let's put an end to this nonsense. Free us!"

"No," retorted the grim woman. "Celeste and Antón go away now. Perhaps find master. You will stay in cave."

"Celeste, how did you know about this passage and cave?" Lorinda asked, stalling for time.

"Antón help build it."

"But why should my stepfather build the passageway?" Lorinda murmured. "It doesn't seem like him."

Celeste did not answer. Gathering up the machete, the Zudi drum, the embroidered altar cloth and other stolen treasures, she prepared to leave.

"It was you who whispered the warning at the thatched cottage!" accused Penny. "You wanted to prevent discovery of this cave!"

Celeste's cruel smile acknowledged the truth. Saying something to Antón in their own language, she padded off down the passageway.

All save Antón now had gone. He blew out the altar candles, picked up the pine torch and would have blown out the cocoanut shell lamp, had Penny not said pleadingly:

"Please leave us a tiny light, Antón. It will be so dark here in the cave."

The man hesitated, glancing down the passage as if fearful Celeste would punish him for such a display of weakness. But he did as Penny requested. First, however, he noted that the lamp was nearly empty of oil and could not burn many minutes. Without extinguishing it, he disappeared into the tunnel.

Waiting only until she was certain Celeste, Antón

and their converts were out of the passage, Lorinda said excitedly:

"They forgot to gag us! We can shout for help!"

"With a hurricane roaring outside, it's a waste of breath," replied Penny. "No one will be on the beach tonight, and our voices wouldn't carry a dozen yards."

"Then what are we to do? Antón and Celeste mean to run away now. The police never will be able to find them unless we act quickly."

"I have an idea, but it may not work."

Penny, her hands and feet securely tied, began to roll toward the cocoanut oil lamp.

"What are you trying to do?" Lorinda asked anxiously.

"Maybe I can burn the cords on my wrists. That's why I asked Antón to leave the lamp."

"Perhaps you can!" cried Lorinda, taking hope. "But it will be dangerous and very hard to do. The oil is almost gone. You'll have to work fast, Penny, or you'll lose your chance!"

STRANGER IN THE STORM

PENNY SQUIRMED and rolled until her hands were very close to the cocoanut oil lamp on the rocky floor of the cave.

"Be careful!" Lorinda cried fearfully. "If your clothing should catch fire, nothing could save you."

Penny held her hands, which were bound behind her back, over the flame. The heat seared her flesh and made her wince with pain.

"Keep it up, Penny!" encouraged her companion. "The cord is catching fire! But the lamp is almost out!"

Penny gritted her teeth and endured the pain. Then the lamp sputtered and went out, leaving the cave to darkness.

"Oh!" wailed Lorinda in bitter disappointment.

Penny tugged at the wrist cords. Although not severed, they were half burned through and weakened. A hard jerk freed her hands.

Only a moment then was required to untie the cords

which held her feet. Next she freed Lorinda. As the girls started to leave through the passageway, Penny felt a cold blast of air upon her neck. Looking up, she was able to distinguish a small opening in the wall of the cave.

"Maybe we can get out there!" she exclaimed. "Give me a boost and I'll see!"

Lorinda lifted her up. Scrambling like a monkey, Penny secured a toe hold and crammed her head and shoulders through the opening. A moment later she ducked back to call to her friend:

"We can get out all right! But the storm is getting awful! I'll crawl out and then help you."

Scrambling through the narrow opening, Penny found herself amid the high rocks overlooking the beach. The wind was blowing in puffs, each so powerful that she nearly was dislodged from her precarious perch.

Reaching back through the hole, Penny offered her arms to Lorinda who succeeded in joining her. They huddled in the lee of an overhanging rock, rain driving into their faces.

"We must get word to the police!" Penny said breathlessly.

"And I must make certain Mother is safe!" Lorinda added. "She's been left too long alone. Antón and Celeste may have gone back there, and in that case, anything might happen!"

Slipping and sliding, the girls descended the rocks to the beach. The river, lashed by a sheet of rain, was dark and ugly. Much of the sand had been inundated and water bubbled at their heels as they ran toward the road.

A car swung toward them, its headlights blurred by the rain. It parked at the curb, and the driver tooted several times as if in signal.

"That looks like Jerry's car!" Penny cried hopefully.

It was, indeed, the reporter. He swung open the automobile door, and as they recognized him, they dashed across the road and gratefully slid into the shelter offered.

"Don't you girls know better than to be running around at a time like this?" Jerry demanded severely. "Lucky I saw you streaking up the beach!"

"What brought you here?" Penny gasped, taking several deep breaths.

"What brought me? Say, don't you realize we're in for a real storm, and it's almost here! The radio ten minutes ago reported that Oelwein, on the coast, has been completely destroyed! I knew you came here to do a little sleuthing, Penny, and I figured someone ought to look after you."

"Thanks, Jerry," she returned gratefully. "We were in trouble—plenty of it."

As the reporter drove on toward the Rhett mansion,

Penny quickly revealed what had happened. Jerry made little comment, but his expression was grim.

"Maybe Antón and Celeste are here," he said as the car reached the Rhett home. "If they are, we'll round 'em up."

Celeste and Antón, however, were not to be found in the mansion. Their rooms remained deserted and there was no indication that they had returned to the house after leaving the cave.

Lorinda lost not a moment in hastening to her mother's bedroom. To her relief, Mrs. Rhett was sleeping quietly and did not awaken.

"Thank goodness, she is safe," the girl murmured. "After what happened in the cave, I feared the worst."

"We ought to get the police on the trail of Antón and Celeste before they make their escape," Jerry urged. "Once the full force of this storm strikes, no one will be able to stir outside."

He tried the telephone but the line remained dead. "I'll drive to the police station," he decided. "Are you girls coming along?"

"I'll stay with Mother," Lorinda said. "She mustn't be left alone."

Penny hesitated, intending to remain with her friend, but Jerry seized her by the arm. "Your father sent me out here to round you up, so I'll take you to the newspaper office," he declared. "Let's go!"

As they opened the front door, rain poured in and

a great blast of wind nearly swept the pair from their feet.

"Wow!" exclaimed the reporter, holding tight to Penny as with heads lowered, they ran for the car. "This is it!"

The air was filled with flying objects, and a shingle loosened from the mansion roof, hurtled against Penny. Jerry pulled the car door open. The wind seized it, nearly wrenching it off the hinges. Gusts were of greater velocity now, with the intervals much shorter.

For a dreadful moment, Penny and Jerry thought the car would not start. The reporter jammed his foot on the starter again and again and gave it the full choke. Suddenly, the motor caught.

As they drove off along the river road, the force of the wind was so great it required all of Jerry's strength to keep the car straight on the road.

"We'll be lucky if we reach the police station!" he exclaimed. "This is a lot worse than I figured."

"Jerry!"

Seizing the reporter's arm, Penny pointed to a crouched figure visible on the road ahead. The woman, hair flying in wild streamers, clutched a large object in her arms, and was bent almost double as she sought to move against the wind.

"It's Celeste!" Penny cried.

Jerry brought the car to the roadside almost beside

the servant. Not until Penny and the reporter were out of the automobile and almost upon her, did she see them. Then with a startled cry, she turned to flee. But it was too late. Jerry seized her by the arm.

"You're coming with us!" he ordered sharply.

Battered and frightened by the force of the wind, Celeste, surprisingly, made no protest. Clutching the big Zudi drum, she allowed Jerry and Penny to pull her into the shelter of the car.

"Where is Antón?" the reporter demanded.

Celeste's answer was a shrug. She gazed toward the mansion grounds, and ignored the pair.

Jerry drove on. He glanced significantly at Penny who guessed that he intended to take Celeste directly to the police station.

However, as they approached the downtown section, the wind blew with even greater power. Not a vehicle was to be seen on the streets. The *Star* building loomed up, but the police station was six blocks away.

"We can't make it," Jerry decided. "I'm turning in here."

One of the double doors of the *Star* garage, where trucks were usually loaded with their papers, stood open. He drove inside, pulling up near the entrance to the newspaper pressroom on the ground floor.

Celeste stirred to life, and made a move to get out of the car.

"Oh, no you don't!" said Jerry, pushing her back. "You and that drum stay with us."

Celeste was of a different opinion. Glaring at Jerry, she slapped at him, and again tried to get her hand on the door handle.

"We can't hold her here," Jerry said. "But I have an idea! Penny, see if the pressroom door is unlocked."

Penny ran to test it and found it unlocked. Now that the extra was out, the pressmen had gathered in a far corner of the big room filled with giant rotary presses, to smoke and watch the storm.

Racing back to the car, Penny made her report.

"Good!" exclaimed Jerry.

With Penny's help, he got Celeste out of the car, separating her from the Zudi drum which they left in the automobile. The woman stubbornly refused to walk, so Jerry lifted her bodily and carried her kicking and struggling into the pressroom.

Near the door was a large storage closet where tools and oil for the presses were kept. Jerry shoved Celeste into this room and turned a key in the lock.

"That will hold her," he observed. "While you lock the Zudi drum in the car, I'll talk to the press foreman and tell him what we've done. Then Celeste can squawk her head off and it will do no good. We'll keep her here until the storm lets up and we can get a police squad to pick her up."

Penny ran back to the loading garage. It was deserted now save for a lone delivery truck which stood directly in front of the paper chute. Although his cargo was loaded, the driver hesitated to try to deliver until the storm abated.

Locking the car, Penny decided she would close the one big double garage door where rain was blowing in.

The hurricane now roared in full fury. Peering out into the deserted street, it seemed to Penny that no person could stand against its strength. Yet as she closed the doors, she was amazed to see a scurrying figure.

The man, his hat gone, overcoat whipped between his legs, grasped a corner of the building for support.

Seeing his face, Penny drew in her breath sharply. A small jagged scar disfigured one cheek. As he struggled past the door, she reached out and grasped his arm.

"Come in here out of the wind," she urged. As she gazed directly into his eyes, she added distinctly: "We have been looking for you a long while, Mr. Rhett!"

IN THE PRESSROOM

"YOU HAVE made a mistake," the man mumbled. "I am not Mr. Rhett. My name is Brown—Edgar Brown."

Penny, none too certain of the identification, gazed at the man's hands. They were soft and white as if unaccustomed to hard work, but he wore no serpent ring on any of his fingers. She felt certain this was the man she had met at the steamship office.

The stranger pulled gently away from her grasp, ready to start out into the howling wind once more.

"You'll be swept off your feet if you try to battle that storm!" Penny protested. "You must stay here until the worst of it is over!"

"But I am not Mr. Rhett."

"Never mind about that," said Penny. "I mistook you for someone else. Just come inside and I'll close the doors."

The man peered outside once more, and noting the intensity of the storm, lost all desire to leave the shel-

ter. He moved away from the entrance, and Penny closed the big, heavy door.

"Come along with me into the pressroom where it is warm," she invited.

Without comment, the man followed her across the cement toward the loading docks. At the other end of the drive, someone opened the doors for a moment to allow a truck to roll inside. A great gust of wind tore through the passage, and sent the stranger's hat careening into a corner.

He darted to recapture it. As he stooped to pick it up, an object on a string which he wore about his neck, swung from beneath his sport shirt. Quickly he pushed it out of sight again, but not before Penny had seen the ring and recognized the serpent design.

"He *is* Mr. Rhett!" she thought, her pulse pounding.

Wisely, she pretended to have observed nothing, and invited him into the pressroom where Jerry was waiting. Celeste, still locked in the storage closet, was rattling the door knob and kicking on the panel with all her strength.

"Jerry," said Penny, dropping her bombshell. "This is Mr. Rhett."

The reporter's mouth dropped agape, while the stranger plainly showed his annoyance.

"I told you I am not Mr. Rhett."

"Then kindly explain the significance of that ring

you wear around your neck. I saw it only a moment ago."

The stranger became confused. "My ring—" he stammered. "Oh, that! An heirloom. I have had it for years."

"Please tell us the truth," pleaded Penny.

"I know nothing about this man you call Mr. Rhett," he replied, avoiding her direct gaze. "Evidently you have someone locked up here. Suppose you explain the meaning."

"Gladly," replied Penny. "We do have someone imprisoned in the storage room ready to turn over to the police as soon as the storm lets up. It is Celeste."

"Celeste!" The stranger's amazed expression betrayed him. Although he added: "And who is she?" it was unconvincing.

"Mr. Rhett, why pretend?" Penny demanded. "We know who you are."

"Very well," said the man, smiling faintly. "So I am Mr. Rhett! I assume you two are reporters for the *Star*."

"Right," agreed Jerry.

"And you want a story. Well, there's no story. Since you have me dead to rights as they say, I'll not deny I am Hamilton Rhett. However, my identity is my own affair. I stepped out of my old life—the bank and my home—because I was tired of a very boring existence. I never was cut to the cloth of a

banker. I dislike being shut up indoors even for an hour. Probably I shall return to South America."

"You say it is your own affair," Penny remarked pointedly. "I am afraid it isn't. Aren't you forgetting a little matter of \$250,000?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I refer to that sum in negotiable bonds which you had in your possession at the time you left the bank."

Mr. Rhett did not seem to understand for a moment. Then he exclaimed: "Oh, the bonds! I was to have returned them to the vault, but it slipped my mind. You will find them in the top desk drawer in my office."

"The desk has been carefully searched. The bonds are not there."

"Not there?" For the first time Mr. Rhett seemed disturbed. "But they must be, unless they were stolen after I went away!"

"The bonds have not been found, and the bank trustees are pressing your family to make restitution. Furthermore, your wife is dangerously ill."

"My wife sick? What is wrong?"

"The doctors do not know. However, Lorinda burned an effigy doll made in your wife's image—she found it in the house. Two burned match sticks tied together also were found by Mrs. Rhett. For some reason she became obsessed with the idea, she was doomed to a lingering fatal illness. She began to re-

fuse food and since then has gone steadily downhill."

"The work of Celeste!"

"We think so. Tonight she stole the Zudi drum, and Lorinda and I found her with Antón and other followers celebrating their rites in a cave near the beach."

"Then they have reverted to their heathen ways!" the banker exclaimed. "My wife always said Celeste hated her, but I, like a blind fool, refused to see it. Once during the years I spent in the jungle, Celeste saved my life and I always felt grateful to her. Now I must forget that, for she is a dangerous woman if she seeks to practice her jungle magic."

"You don't actually believe Celeste could make your wife ill merely by suggestion?" Jerry inquired in amazement.

"In the jungles I have seen a native die from superficial wounds. If told the spear which struck him had been sung over by an enemy, the native would simply lie down, refuse food and pine away. My wife is in great danger!"

"Can nothing be done?" cried Penny.

Mr. Rhett's face tightened into hard, grim lines. "A great deal can be done," he said. "But Celeste must be fought with her own jungle weapons. To turn her over to the police will not be sufficient. She is inside the closet you say—let me talk to her."

"Okay," agreed Jerry, "but Celeste in her present mood is a pretty brisk customer. To make sure she doesn't get away, I'll lock the pressroom door before letting her out of her cage."

As the reporter went to the exit, Penny heard the pressmen at the other end of the room shout that the storm had abated.

"The hurricane has not passed," corrected Mr. Rhett quietly. "This lull merely marks the end of the first phase. The wind will return harder than ever in a few minutes from another quarter."

Jerry returned, and taking the key to the storage room from his pocket, cautiously unlocked the door. Celeste, blinking like an owl as she staggered out under the electric lights, gasped as she saw Mr. Rhett.

"Master!" she exclaimed worshipfully. "You come back!"

Mr. Rhett's face showed no trace of the affection he had felt for his servant. "Celeste," he said, "you've been dabbling in magic again! What's this nonsense about my wife being ill and going to die?"

"The truth, Master. Antón and I try hard to save her, but no use. She die next month. Maybe sooner."

"Get this through your head, Celeste. My wife will not die. She will be as well as you are within two days. All your incantations over the doll were wasted. You plotted to no avail. I am home now,

and if you persist in your wickedness, I will meet your so-called magic with stronger magic of my own!"

"Celeste sorry," the old woman whimpered. "Do it only to get money for master."

"I need no money and want none. You have been very wicked, Celeste, and must be turned over to the police for safe keeping."

"Oh, no, Master! Not the police!"

"Yes, and now is the time to take you there during this lull in the storm."

Celeste's wild eyes darted about the room, searching for a means of escape. With a savage lunge, she reached the door only to find it locked.

As Jerry and Mr. Rhett bore down upon her, she scurried frantically along the outer room wall, coming to the metal paper chute through which packages of freshly-printed papers were tossed for delivery.

Quick as a cat, Celeste scrambled into the chute, crawling through on all fours. At the chute's exit on the sheltered cement drive, stood the waiting paper truck, its rear door ajar. Already loaded, the driver awaited only this lull in the storm before setting off to deliver his cargo.

Even as Celeste crawled through the chute, the man started the truck engine. The woman did not hesitate. Leaping into the rear of the vehicle, she slammed the door.

Hearing it close, the driver assumed another workman had shut it as a signal for him to pull out. Shifting gears, he drove away with his cargo of papers—and Celeste.

THE GRINNING GARGOYLE

BY THE time Jerry, Penny and Mr. Rhett unlocked the pressroom door and reached the loading dock, the truck bearing Celeste was far down the street.

"Hey, where'd that truck go?" the reporter shouted to another workman at the far end of the drive.

"Docks at the end of Basset Street," he answered. "A batch o' papers go aboard the *Monclove* for shipment to Presque Isle."

Jerry's car stood close by. He sprang in, making room for Penny and Mr. Rhett.

The newspaper truck had disappeared by the time they drove out on the street. Jerry took a short-cut route to the Basset Street docks. Signs and debris of all description cluttered the roadway. Rain had ceased, but the ominous quiet, the heaviness of the air, was even more frightening than the wind had been.

In a distant section of the city they heard the high-pitched whistle of a police siren; otherwise, the streets were as silent as the tomb.

The car turned a corner, and directly ahead Penny glimpsed the newspaper truck.

"There it is!" she cried, but Jerry also had seen the vehicle.

He put on speed, and was close behind as the truck pulled up with a jerk at Dock 12. Green water whipped to foam, crashed with heavy impact against the dock posts and flooded out on the slippery plank-ing.

"We won't have much time!" Mr. Rhett exclaimed. "When the next phase of the storm comes—and it's close now—the wind will be terrific!"

The men, with Penny close behind, leaped from the car. Quick as they were, Celeste was out of the truck before they could reach its door.

She stopped short as she saw the trio, then like a trapped animal, turned and fled in the opposite direction.

"Celeste!" Mr. Rhett shouted. "Wait!"

The woman paid no attention. Splashing ankle-deep through water that washed the dock planks, she ran precariously close to the river's edge.

A hoarse shout from behind caused Penny to turn. The driver of the truck was gesturing and pointing first to the dark sky and then to an open shed. For a moment she did not understand, but as he ran for the shelter, she heard the deep-throated roar of the hurricane as it returned for its final onslaught.

"Quick!" cried Mr. Rhett who also recognized the danger. "Inside!"

The three ran back to the shed where the truck-driver had taken shelter. Although they shouted again and again to Celeste, she ignored their warnings.

As the wind struck, they saw her at the very edge of the dock. She half turned toward the shed as if debating whether or not to seek its shelter, then took a step or two in the opposite direction.

A great gust lifted off a section of the shed roof and whirled it away. As the full impact of the wind swept around the building, Celeste clung to a dock post for an instant; then her fingers lost their grip, and with a scream, she toppled over the edge into the churning water.

Jerry started toward the door, but Mr. Rhett seized his arm, dragging him back.

"Don't be a fool! Celeste is beyond help! You'll only lose your own life if you venture out there now!"

Already Celeste had disappeared beneath the turbulent waters, leaving no trace. Anxiously those in the shed watched but her head never appeared above the surface.

"Poor Celeste," said Mr. Rhett sadly. "She meant well, but she was superstitious and misguided. However, she would have pined away in captivity. Perhaps she went the best way."

The servant's startling death placed a pall upon the

four who huddled in the shed. Close together, they flattened themselves against the wall, expecting at any moment that the entire building would be lifted from its foundation and hurled into the river. The force of the wind was almost unbelievable.

After nearly a half hour, the gusts lost their strength and Mr. Rhett declared that the greatest danger had been passed.

"Tell me everything that happened while I was away," he requested Penny and Jerry.

"We will," promised Penny, "but first, suppose you explain why you went away."

"I thought I did tell you." Mr. Rhett drew a deep sigh. "For many months I considered retiring from the bank. I discussed it with my wife, but she failed to see my viewpoint and insisted that I remain. We became deadlocked, so to speak.

"I tried for her sake to force myself to like bank work, but it was utterly impossible. Each day I found myself longing for the old carefree adventurous days."

"So you quietly walked out?" Jerry supplied.

"Something like that. My actions weren't premeditated. One thing led to another. I had a quarrel with my wife over neglect of bank duties. As I sat thinking it over at my desk, it struck me that Lorinda and her mother probably would be happier if I removed myself from the picture."

"Did you write anything as you sat there?" Penny interposed eagerly.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"Did you draw a picture of a plumed serpent?"

"Yes, I believe so, though it was only absent-minded doodling."

"And beneath the drawing you wrote, 'This shall be the end.'"

"Why, yes, I did," the man acknowledged. "I had decided to walk out and those words expressed the conclusion I reached. I wrote the thought absent-mindedly and never intended it to fall into anyone's hands. Did I leave the paper in the desk?"

"The police found it there."

"I must have been quite upset," Mr. Rhett said, frowning. "At any rate, I walked out with less than three dollars in my pocket, and didn't realize until later that I was without funds."

"So you took lodging in a cheap flop house on Cherry Street?" Jerry interposed.

"Yes, you seem to have followed my actions very closely. Although the lodgings were hardly deluxe, I did not mind the experience. I frequently have slept on the ground or in native huts."

"You stayed there only one night?" Penny inquired.

"Another lodger told me two persons had come to ask questions about a man who wore a serpent ring," Mr. Rhett said. "Not wishing to be found, I removed

the ring from my finger, and found another lodging place. When my money ran out, I picked up a little work as a laborer at one of the mills."

"I saw you inquiring at one of the steamship ticket offices," Penny reminded him. "You remember that, I'm sure."

"I sought to work my passage on a boat going to South America," Mr. Rhett explained.

"All this time, didn't you read the newspapers?" Jerry asked curiously. "Didn't you know the bonds were missing and that your wife was ill?"

Mr. Rhett shook his head. "I purposely avoided looking at the newspapers. I was afraid if I did I might be tempted to return to my old life."

"And now?" asked Penny softly.

"I have no future, only the present. Before making any plans, I must return home to see that my wife frees her mind from Celeste's evil suggestions. I made a great mistake in bringing Celeste and Antón into the household. But once my wife knows Celeste is dead, I am confident she will quickly recover."

"You still love your wife?"

"I shall always love her," he returned quietly, "but she has no use for me. I've been a drag on her since the day we were married."

"She doesn't feel that way, I'm sure," Penny corrected. "Since you went away, she's been heart-broken. Lorinda needs you too."

"I can never return to the bank," Mr. Rhett repeated. "And there are the stolen bonds to be considered. Why, the police may even arrest me! I'm all mixed up."

"Matters will straighten out as soon as you see your wife," Penny declared. "However, I'll admit recovering the bonds may not be so easy. To my knowledge, the police haven't a single clue."

Jerry was peering out the open shed door. "The storm is letting up," he called. "We'll soon be able to get out of here."

Another half hour and the wind died sufficiently so that the party could safely leave the shelter. The truck driver returned to the newspaper office, while Jerry and Penny drove Mr. Rhett to his home.

The mansion yard was cluttered with uprooted trees, boards and debris. Penny ran down the path a short distance and returned to report that the thatched roof cottage had vanished without a trace.

"Perhaps it is just as well," said Mr. Rhett. "It was a mistake to build the cottage, but Celeste first put the idea in my head. I intended to use it only as a trophy room, but to Celeste it became a living symbol of the life she had left behind."

"Why did you build the passageway leading to the cave and to Celeste's room?" Penny inquired.

Mr. Rhett's blank expression told her that he did not understand. After she had explained, he said

grimly: "Antón and Celeste must have dug the tunnel without my knowledge! Oh, they were a cunning pair!"

"And Antón still is on the loose," Jerry reminded the banker. "We'll have to notify the police to pick him up."

Mr. Rhett and the young people entered the house. Lorinda, startled by hearing the front door open, ran to the head of the stairway. Seeing her stepfather, she gave a cry of joy and raced to meet him.

"You've come back! Oh, Mother needs you so badly. Do go to her at once."

Mr. Rhett needed no urging. He was up the steps two at a time. Jerry and Penny, not wishing to intrude, remained in the living room, but a few minutes later, Lorinda called them.

"Oh, everything is wonderful!" she exclaimed. "Mother and Father have adjusted all their differences. And best of all, she's already half over the idea she is going to die. Why, he just told her Celeste was dead and that she could never do any further harm. Mother snapped right out of it!"

Lorinda insisted that Jerry and Penny go upstairs. Mrs. Rhett was sitting up in bed, and her eyes were shining.

"How silly I've been," she declared. "As I look back, I realize Celeste hated me and kept putting ideas in my mind. Why, I feel much better already."

"Hungry?" asked Lorinda.

"Indeed, I am. I must have a gigantic dinner tonight." Mrs. Rhett laughed and added: "With everything well salted!"

"About the bank—" began Mr. Rhett.

"Let's not talk about it now," his wife pleaded. "I was wrong about that too. I'll never ask you to go back there, for it isn't your type of life. Instead, perhaps we can go away somewhere on a long trip—South America, would that appeal to you, Hamilton?"

"Would it?" he chuckled. "Someone has been putting ideas in your head, and this time it wasn't Celeste!"

Anxious to return to the newspaper office and to stop at the police station, Jerry and Penny soon took leave of the Rhetts, after receiving urgent invitations to return later that night.

"Well, it appears everything is turning out hunkey dorey for the Rhetts," Jerry observed as he and Penny drove away from the mansion. "Antón is certain to be caught by the police, and those followers of his will be jailed too if they ever show their faces again."

"Everything *might* be fine for the Rhetts except for one thing," Penny returned. "Mrs. Rhett doesn't have much ready cash available, and there still remains a little matter of \$250,000 in missing bonds."

"I'd forgotten about that. You're right, Rhett still is in an awkward spot."

The car drove into the downtown section where a few vehicles now were moving. Under the glow of the street lights, workmen were clearing the debris away.

As the car approached the First National Bank, Penny chanced to raise her eyes toward the second story balcony fronting the street. The grinning gargoyles stood out in dark relief, and as she gazed at them, she suddenly saw a shadowy figure moving stealthily toward the one nearest the open door leading from Mr. Rhett's private office.

"Why, that looks like Albert Potts!" she exclaimed.

As she watched in amazement, the man approached the gargoyle. Reaching his hand far in between the open jaws, he removed something which he thrust into his overcoat pocket. Then, with a nervous glance down upon the deserted street, he stepped back into Mr. Rhett's office, and closed the door.

ON THE BALCONY

"JERRY, THAT was Albert Potts on the balcony!" Penny cried excitedly. "I'm sure I saw him remove an object from inside the gargoyle!"

"Maybe he was just looking to see what damage was done by the storm," commented the reporter.

"He took something out and put it in his overcoat pocket! Jerry, now that I think back, Potts acted queerly that first day when the police investigated Mr. Rhett's office. He didn't want anyone to go near the gargoyle! Another thing, he's been spending money as if it were rainwater!"

"You're suggesting—"

"That it was Albert Potts who stole the bonds! Weren't they left in Mr. Rhett's desk? Potts knew it and had a perfect chance to take them! He implied that Rhett walked off with them! Actually, he hid the bonds in the gargoyle, knowing that if they were found there, no blame would be likely to fall upon him. Whenever he needed money, he cashed a bond

—that's why only a few have shown up at out of town banks!"

"Say, maybe you have something!" exclaimed Jerry, pulling up at the curb. "If he had hid the bonds in the gargoyle, it would be natural for him to wonder if they still were safe after this storm! He might have decided to shift them to another place."

"My idea exactly! Jerry, let's nab him and turn him over to the police!"

"Not quite so fast, my little chickadee. If we accuse Potts, and it turns out we're wrong, well, he could make it hot for us."

"We'll have to take a chance," Penny urged.

Leaving the car at the curb, the pair walked hurriedly to the bank. The building was dark and the lights were off inside.

"Sure you saw Potts on the balcony?" Jerry asked as they huddled against the wall for protection against the biting wind.

"Yes, and I think he's coming now!"

Penny was correct. They heard footsteps coming down the marble stairway, and a moment later, the bank secretary unlocked the door. The waiting couple made no move until he had locked himself out, but as he started away, Jerry tapped him on the shoulder.

Potts whirled around, obviously startled. His face blanched.

"Hello, Potts," said Jerry. "Working late, aren't you?"

"Why, yes," stammered the man, edging away.

"Can you spare a match?"

Potts half reached into his pocket as if to proffer one, then said testily: "I haven't any. Sorry."

"Sure now, you must have a match," said Jerry, brushing against him. "Maybe in your overcoat pocket."

Before Potts could prevent it, he had thrust his hands deep into each of the outside pockets. The bank clerk jerked angrily away. However, it was too late. Jerry triumphantly brought to light a heavy manila envelope.

"Give that to me!" Potts cried furiously.

Sidestepping him, Jerry pulled several bonds of large denomination from the envelope.

"The stolen bonds!" exclaimed Penny. "Mr. Potts, whatever possessed you to do it?"

The bank secretary never answered the question. Instead, he wheeled and started at a run down the street. As he reached the corner, a policeman who had just finished making a report to headquarters, turned from his phone box.

"Stop that man!" yelled Jerry.

The policeman grasped Potts, bringing him up short. After that, the bank secretary did his explaining to the desk sergeant at police headquarters. So

unconvincing was his story, that he was immediately locked in a cell.

Meanwhile, Jerry and Penny related all they knew about the case. All scout cars were ordered to be on the alert to pick up Antón. Mr. Rhett was brought to the station within the hour, and promptly identified the recovered bonds as those he had left in his office desk.

At first, Potts firmly maintained his innocence, but after police had subjected him to a lie detector test, he realized his case was lost. When one of the detectives who was questioning him, remarked that his wife likely would be implicated in the theft, Potts broke completely:

"No! No! My wife had nothing to do with it," he insisted. "I wanted to give my family better things—that was why I took the bonds. I thought Mr. Rhett would never return and that he would be blamed for the theft."

"How did you cash the bonds?" he was asked.

"I was afraid to take them to a bank myself," Potts confessed. "Instead, I paid a woman in another town to do it for me. But she did it only as a favor, and had no idea the bonds were stolen. I alone am to blame."

A check by police revealed that Potts had spent only \$2,000 of the total amount stolen. Mr. Rhett declared that this sum easily could be made up, so

that the bank would sustain no loss. He was inclined to be lenient with his secretary, but police were insistent that the man be brought to trial.

Jerry and Penny, knowing that they had a big story to write, did not tarry long at the police station. However, the police desk sergeant promised to keep them informed of any new developments in the case. True to his word, he called them soon after they reached the *Star* office. His news was that Antón had been captured by the police and now was safely locked in a jail cell.

"Well, that rings the gong on the case," Jerry announced as he hung up the telephone. "Thanks to you, Penny, it's all wound up."

"And it's nearly edition time!" barked the city editor. "Let's get going on that story."

He looked at Jerry who was known as the best writer on the paper, and then his eyes moved on to Penny who waited with bated breath.

"This was her story from start to finish," said Jerry as the editor hesitated.

"Get going!" ordered the editor again, and now he looked straight at Penny. "Give it to me in takes."

Penny hurried to a typewriter. The lead, telling of Mr. Rhett's return, Potts' arrest and recovery of the stolen bonds, almost wrote itself. Keeping her own part and Jerry's entirely out of the story, she wrote smoothly and with speed.

When she had finished half a page, she called: "Copy boy!" and ripping the sheet of paper from the typewriter gave it to him to carry to the editor's desk.

With a fresh sheet in the machine, she wrote on until she had a second "take" ready. Again she called the copy boy and, as he snatched it from her hand, rolled still another sheet into the typewriter.

At last she was on the final page and glanced over it before she typed "30" at the end. The story had been well told, written tersely in the manner DeWitt liked. With a feeling of exultation, she realized she had done a good job.

Getting to her feet, she dropped the last page into the copy basket. Earlier sheets already had been copy-read and were in the process of being set into type. Any moment now, the edition would roll and papers would be on the street.

Penny turned from the desk to see Jerry sitting with his feet propped up on one of the tables. He was gazing at her quizzically and grinning.

"Well, you did it again, Penny!" he remarked.

"We did it together," she corrected.

"With the help of our silent partner," he added lightly.

"Silent partner?"

"The hurricane. It damaged a lot of Riverview property, but on the other side of the ledger, it helped write '30' to the Rhett case."

Penny nodded as she reached for her hat and rain-coat. Just then, a copy boy ran up.

"Telephone for you," he said. "It's your housekeeper, Mrs. Weems. She wants to know if you're safe."

"Safe and sound and on my way home," laughed Penny. "Tell her I've already started."

"And that she's being driven by her faithful chauffeur," chuckled Jerry, as he reached for his hat. "Which reminds me, we have a little package to deliver to the Rhett's."

"The Zudi drum! I forgot all about it!"

"Haven't you forgotten another important matter too?" teased Jerry, escorting her through the swinging gate. "Me, for instance."

"You?"

"My reward for tonight's work. Girl reporters, even cute little numbers like you, can't snatch my by-lines without paying the piper!"

"And what fee do you require?" Penny asked with pretended innocence.

"We'll go into that later," he chuckled, pinning her neatly into a shadowy corner of the vestibule. "Just now, I'll take a little kiss on deposit!"

THE END